SPORT

Semenyo an instant hit as City close on League Cup final

NEWCASTLE: Manchester City's Antoine Semenyo (second R) scores during the League Cup semi-final first leg against Newcastle United at St James' Park.—Reuters

NEWCASTLE: Antoine Semenyo made himself an instant Manchester City hero as Pep Guardiola's men took a giant stride towards the League Cup final with a 2-0 win against Newcastle United.

The Ghana international, who joined from Bournemouth for 65 million ($87 million) last week, opened the scoring and also had a second goal controversially ruled out.

But Rayan Cherki delivered what could be the knockout blow to the holders in the 98th minute.

The Magpies ended a 70-year wait for a domestic trophy by winning the League Cup last season, but will need a heroic fightback to reach Wembley when the sides meet again for the second leg of the semi-final on Feb 4.

Semenyo also scored on his debut on Saturday in a 10-1 demolition of Exeter in the FA Cup.

"The whole environment here is perfect," Semenyo said. "Everyone is confident and wanting to achieve the best. I've just come into that and they've helped me with my confidence and they've made me feel welcome."

In previous years he would have been cup-tied after featuring for Bournemouth earlier in the competition.

Newcastle boss Eddie Howe made clear his dissatisfaction before the game with a rule change this season that allows players to play for two clubs in the one campaign and City took full advantage.

Guardiola showed his desire to reach the final for the first time since 2021 as Erling Haaland made a first League Cup start in three years in a strong City selection just days before they visit Manchester United in the Premier League.

Yoane Wissa blazed a glorious early chance over the bar as Newcastle roared out of the blocks in front of a packed St. James' Park.

"Looking back with hindsight, you'd say that's potentially a big turning point," Howe said of the chance. "We wanted to get the crowd fully into the match."

But that was the closest either side came in a cagey first half.

City goalkeeper James Trafford had been a long-term target for Newcastle prior to his return to the Etihad from Burnley in July.

The England under-21 international has had to play second fiddle to Gianluigi Donnarumma for most of the season but proved his worth with a stunning save to claw away Wissa's looping header early in the second half.

Seconds later, Bruno Guimaraes blasted against the post as Newcastle pressed for the opening.

But they were caught with a sucker punch at the other end when Jeremy Doku sped towards the by-line and his cross was turned by Bernardo Silva into the path of Semenyo to prod home from close range.

Semenyo thought he had a third City goal in two appearances when he acrobatically flicked in from a corner.

However, after a VAR review lasting over five minutes, the officials finally adjudged that Haaland had prevented Malick Thiaw's ability to play the ball from an offside position.

The vociferous home crowd celebrated the let-off like a goal but their side failed to find the net despite a late flurry of chances for Nick Woltemade.

And City's threat on the counter-attack was finally realised when Cherki swept in Rayan Ait-Nouri's low cross to secure a commanding first-leg lead.—Agencies

Milan coach Allegri carries Olympic torch as others complain

ROME: Massimiliano Allegri, the coach of Italian football side AC Milan, joined the ranks of Winter Olympics torchbearers on Wednesday, amid a row over the exclusion of former athletes that has prompted government intervention.

The torch is journeying through Italy's 110 provinces ahead of the start of the Milano-Cortina games, scheduled for February 6-22.

Allegri walked with other volunteers through the city of Borgomanero, about 70 kilometres (45 miles) northwest of Milan.

Some 10,001 torchbearers have been mobilised to carry the flame, wearing white uniforms with a red-and-yellow pattern recalling the Olympic flame.

But former cross-country skiing champion Silvio Fauner is complaining that he and other Olympic medal winners have been sidelined.

"There's no respect for us champions. I consider it an incredible insult," Fauner said in an interview on Tuesday with sports daily *La Gazzetta dello Sport*.

"I represent 10 athletes who have won 35 Olympic medals, starting with the two gold relay teams of 1994 and 2006... We were not involved in the slightest in any Winter Olympics initiative in our country. Neither torchbearers, nor ambassadors, nor any role. Nothing," he said.

Olympics organisers said in a statement Fauner had been excluded from torchbearing duties because political office holders are disqualified.

Fauner is deputy mayor of Sappada, a ski resort in the Dolomites.

In a follow-up on Facebook, the retired athlete complained of double standards, noting that a local politician was among the torchbearers in Sicily.

He said he was speaking up for "at least 15 [other] athletes who have won Olympic medals in winter sports, champions who have written the history of Italian sport and who today feel sidelined."

Italian Infrastructure Minister Matteo Salvini, who is heavily involved in Olympics preparations, and Sports Minister Andrea Abodi announced on Wednesday an "urgent meeting" with Games organisers to deal with the controversy.

In a joint statement, they said they wanted to shed light "on very baffling decisions".—Reuters

Premature celebration costs Austria's Ofner Australian Open spot

MELBOURNE: Sebastian Ofner may never forget the rules of the sport again after his premature victory celebration turned into a nightmare collapse against Nishesh Basavareddy in the Australian Open qualifiers on Wednesday.

Austrian Ofner looked destined for the next round when he surged to a commanding 6-1 lead in the deciding set tiebreak against 20-year-old American Basavareddy.

But after winning another point to move 7-1 ahead, Ofner began celebrating and walked confidently toward the net — apparently forgetting that final-set tiebreaks require 10 points to win and not the usual seven.

The sheepish realisation of his blunder was written all over Ofner's face as he trudged back to the baseline, but the damage was already done as Basavareddy had all the motivation he needed.

What followed was a dramatic turnaround as Basavareddy reeled off eight of the next nine points before snatching a stunning 4-6, 6-4, 7-6(13-11) victory from the jaws of defeat.

Basavareddy marked his remarkable comeback by first holding his hands at his neck in a 'choking' celebration before pumping his fist, while a deflated Ofner could only shake hands and contemplate what might have been.

The victory was particularly sweet for the American, who earned his stripes as a wildcard last year when he took the opening set off 10-time champion Novak Djokovic in the first round before eventually being eliminated.—Reuters

Atletico progress in Copa del Rey

A CORUNA: Antoine Griezmann's sublime second-half free kick earned Atletico Madrid a 1-0 win at second-tier Deportivo La Coruna on Tuesday, securing their spot in the Copa del Rey quarter-finals.

Coming off a frustrating start to 2026 with a disappointing 1-1 draw in LaLiga against Real Sociedad and a 2-1 loss in the Spanish Super Cup to bitter rivals Real Madrid, Diego Simeone fielded a near full-strength side at the Riazor Stadium, with only goalkeeper Jan Oblak rested among regular starters.

Midfielder Conor Gallagher, reportedly close to joining Tottenham Hotspur, and forward Giacomo Raspadori, linked with a move to Atalanta, were also absent from the squad that made the trip to Galicia.

Atletico dictated the early proceedings, with Julian Alvarez denied by La Coruna keeper German Parreno following a sharp effort, while Matteo Ruggeri struck the woodwork in the 15th minute.

La Coruna came close to an opener when Cristian Herrera's close-range shot was superbly saved by Atletico's back-up goalkeeper Juan Musso.

Griezmann grew into the game, narrowly missing the target with a fierce strike from distance that rattled the crossbar in the 40th minute before the decisive moment arrived in the 61st.

Awarded a free kick on the edge of the penalty area, Griezmann stepped up and delivered a left-footed effort that curled into the top corner, leaving keeper German Parreno with no chance.

Atletico maintained control for much of the second half, their defensive organisation under Simeone proving impenetrable for a La Coruna side that has now won just once in their last seven outings across all competitions.

Despite dominating possession and creating further chances, Atletico struggled to add to their lead, with Griezmann's strike proving the only goal of the match.

Elsewhere, Athletic Bilbao edged second-division Cultural Leonesa with a thrilling 4-3 win after extra-time, despite having Aitor Paredes sent off in the 56th minute.

Real Sociedad and Osasuna drew 2-2, with the former progressing 4-3 on penalties.—Agencies

DORTMUND: Borussia Dortmund's Serhou Guirassy (C) scores during the Bundesliga match against Werder Bremen at Signal Iduna Park.—Reuters

Dortmund ease past Werder

DORTMUND: Borussia Dortmund cruised to a 3-0 victory over Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga on Tuesday to bounce back from Friday's frustrating draw at Eintracht Frankfurt and stretch their unbeaten run to 10 league games.

Dortmund, who provisionally cut Bayern Munich's lead at the top to eight points, had led twice against Frankfurt on Friday but then needed a stoppage-time equaliser to rescue a 3-3 draw. They were far more efficient on Tuesday, carving out an early lead when captain Nico Schlotterbeck headed in from a corner in the 11th minute.

Werder had a chance to level four minutes later but keeper Gregor Kobel did well to stop Justin Njinmah's effort.

Werder enjoyed a stronger second half and doubled their lead with Marcel Sabitzer's crisp shot from the edge of the box in the 76th minute in the Austrian's 250th Bundesliga match before substitute Serhou Guirassy tapped in from close range in the 83rd to make it 3-0.

"Obviously it wasn't our best game — everyone has the right to react how they like," Sabitzer told Sky. "There's no point beating around the bush — obviously it's not what we're aiming for."

The win lifted Dortmund to 36 points in second place.

VfB Stuttgart climbed to third on 32 following their 3-2 win over Frankfurt.

Nikolas Nartey nabbed a late winner and Deniz Undav continued his hot form as Stuttgart to climb to two spots to third.

"It was wild," Undav told Sky Germany of the "spectacular game". "I could have scored 10 goals myself. We could have easily won 3-1, 4-1."

RB Leipzig are fourth on 29 with two games in hand while Bayer Leverkusen, also on 29, had their match against Hamburg SV on Tuesday postponed due to snow.—Agencies

Roma sunk by late Torino winner in Italian Cup

ROME: AS Roma crashed out of the Italian Cup on Tuesday as they lost 3-2 at home to Torino despite a goal from 16-year-old prodigy Antonio Arena.

Trailing 2-1 going into the final 10 minutes, Gian Piero Gasperini decided to bring on the Australian-born centre forward who has represented Italy in underage football since last year.

On his debut for Roma, Arena sent the Stadio Olimpico wild as his first touch of the ball was to head in a leveller for the hosts.

But Roman joy was short-lived as Emirhan Ilkhan netted a 90th-minute winner for Torino.

Earlier, a Che Adams brace either side of a strike by Mario Hermoso had give Torino the advantage.

Torino will face Serie A leaders Inter Milan in the next round.

Roma's elimination compounds their recent struggles. The Giallorossi, who briefly took the lead in Serie A after the 12th matchday, have lost four of their last eight league games as they currently sit in fifth place.

The last round of 16 match will see relegation battlers Fiorentina take on European-chasing Como on Jan 27.—AFP

Keys wins Australian Open warm-up

ADELAIDE: Defending Australian Open champion Madison Keys overcame some first-set serve wobbles to win her latest warm-up match for the opening Grand Slam of the year on Wednesday.

The 30-year-old American, who will be seeded ninth when the Australian Open begins on Sunday, beat Czech teenager Tereza Valentova 6-4, 6-1 at the Adelaide International.

Keys, who won in Adelaide last year before going on to lift her maiden major, served up seven double faults in the opening set against the 18-year-old.

She improved in the second, breaking twice and converting her third match point to reach the quarter-finals after an 85-minute workout on court.

"Experience helps get through the tricky moments," Keys said. "I was able to take momentum in the second set and play really well. I had to raise my level. You have to take your chances on any opportunities you get."

World number 60 Valentova is one of a number of rising young talents on the women's circuit.

Keys said that facing the new generation was always a challenge.

"I have to lean on my experience a little bit. They are so young, have so much energy and are just so good. You expect them to play great tennis."

The American will face another teenager, 17th-ranked Victoria Mboko, in the last eight. The 18-year-old Canadian announced herself on the world stage last year by winning the WTA 1000 title in Montreal and the Hong Kong Open.

Keys began her 2026 Australian Open preparations last week in Brisbane, losing in the quarter-finals to world number one Aryna Sabalenka.—AFP

Marseille put nine past Bayeux

CAEN: Olympique de Marseille progressed to the last 16 of the French Cup on Tuesday with an emphatic 9-0 win over amateur side Bayeux.

Roberto De Zerbi's team sit third in Ligue 1, eight points off leaders RC Lens, and the Italian showed his desire to collect some silverware by fielding a strong side for their clash with the unfancied Norman outfit.

English international Mason Greenwood, and French 2018 World Cup winner Benjamin Pavard, started for Marseille in Caen where the match took place at the local third-division side's stadium because Bayeux's home ground was not big enough.

First-half goals from Angel Gomes, Hamed Junior Traore, Greenwood and Amine Gouiri put Marseille in cruise control.

The former Manchester United forward Greenwood scored his second early in the second period, before Gouiri again netted, as did CJ Egan-Riley and Neal Maupay.

Greenwood then completed his hat-trick in the 90th minute.

Marseille will next face fellow Ligue 1 club Rennes in the last 16, following the draw earlier on Tuesday.—AFP

CAEN: Marseille's Amine Gouiri (C) crosses the ball for team-mate Mason Greenwood (not pictured) to score during the French Cup match against Bayeux at the Michel-d'Ornano Stadium.—AFP

Flurry of centuries as national snooker championship heats up

By Our Sports Reporter

KARACHI: The second day of the NBP 50th National Snooker Championship witnessed a barrage of high scoring on Wednesday, with Abdul Sattar setting a new tournament benchmark amid a cascade of century breaks here at the NBP Sports Complex.

Sattar of Sindh registered the event's highest break so far, a superb 133, during his 4-1 victory over Mohammad Ahmad of Punjab.

After dropping the first frame, Sattar took control, his landmark clearance in the third frame highlighting a dominant comeback.

His effort headlined a day of prolific scoring, with six other players crafting centuries across their matches.

Ahmar Tariq (Punjab) compiled a 105 in his 4-0 win over Saif Ali Khan, while Rana Irfan (Punjab) made a 106 in a 4-0 defeat of Asad Khan.

Sohaib Asad (Punjab) fired a 113, Mubashir Raza (Punjab) a 111 and Aakash Rafique (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) a 111 in their respective victories.

Hasnain Akhtar of Sindh, who caused a major upset on the opening day by defeating fifth seed Mohammad Naseem Akhtar, continued his strong form with a 105 break in a 4-0 win against Ghulam Abbas.

The day's play also featured 2022 IBSF world champion Ahsan Ramzan.

The 20-year-old from Punjab opened his campaign with a 4-1 win over Sheikh M. Mudassir, crafting breaks of 70, 83 and 55 in the process.

In other notable results, Ali Hamza of Sindh inflicted a second consecutive defeat on the struggling fifth seed, Naseem Akhtar, securing a 4-2 victory.

Punjab's Wasim Abbas survived a tough challenge from Abdul Javed, ultimately winning 4-3 in a match that saw his opponent make a 71 break in the first frame. Wasim sealed the decider with a 73 clearance.

Shan Namat, representing Islamabad, also recorded two wins on the day, first edging Kamran Albert 4-3 in a comeback from three frames down and later defeating Haris Khan 4-0 with breaks of 68, 57 and 66.

Further victories were recorded by Asif Toba (Punjab), Sultan Mohammad (Sindh), Ali Raza (Sindh) and Sohail Shehzad (Sindh).

The championship continues on Thursday with the final round of group stage matches, where players will compete to secure a top-two position in their groups and advance to the knockout phase.